



From icicles to flames, take a look at the rise, fall and future of novelty typography.

by Steven Heller

Novelty typography is goofy. It's designed to playfully stimulate perception and behavior—a serious communications tool in a seriously silly guise. We've all seen icicle-covered typefaces on Christmas cards, ice machines and ice cream wagons. The message is telegraphed instantaneously without ambiguity. Sure, there may be more sophisticated ways to say “winter” or “cold,” but icicles on the word “ice” is as minimal as one gets.

I call this *typography parlante*, or type that speaks—a variant of *architecture parlante*, or buildings that announce their function, such as the famous Donut Hole bakery in California where customers drive in through the hole. There are many examples of typography parlante created for various reasons. For instance, music note alphabets convey the idea of ... you guessed it, music! Lariat or rope letters suggest rodeos. Flames imply hot. Stars and stripes represent America. The venerable Rustic (or Log Cabin) typeface produced by Vincent Figgins' foundry in the mid 1800s has numerous metaphorical applications, including campsites, hiking and wood splitting.

Novelty, which also includes decorative and ornamented typefaces (editor's note: see page 35), originated in the 1800s when printed advertising was used to hawk goods and services. Regarding novelty type's rapid development, Alexander Lawson wrote in *Printing Types: An Introduction* (Beacon Press, 1971), “Early in the 19th century, English type founders produced a variety of embellished types designed to emphasize their unique characteristics for the single purpose of attracting attention. Fat faces, grotesques and Egyptians ... were not flamboyant enough for the new requirements of advertising display.”

Type founders quickly discovered that virtually any outlandish designs that grabbed passersby were valued by job printers for posters, broadsides and adverts. Initially, the ornamented inline or outline versions of Didot and Egyptian styles evolved into hybrids of existing faces, but as the process of electrotyping allowed for cheaper and faster reproductions, much more quirky and eccentric concoctions emerged. Some of the oddest novelty letterforms of the mid- to late-19th century mimicked Gothic architecture's intricate filigree, a result of the Victorian era's decorative extravagances.

Novelty types are always used as display faces. Setting text blocks with Rustic was not an option since reducing it to text size would be absurd. Moreover, novelty type is the lure, not the bait—the headline, not the text. Ornamented letters are derived from monastic scripts, while novelty fancy faces take inspiration

more from nontypographic, easily transformed objects, like ribbon and the aforementioned fire, ice, rope, logs and twigs.

Concerning the market for novelties, an article in an 1879 *Typographic Advertiser* stated: “We change, tastes change, fashions change. The special furor is now for bric-a-brac—antique pots and platters, Japanese oddities and Chinese monstrosities. But fashion's rule is despotic, and so, yielding to her commands, we have prepared and show in this number some oddities to meet the taste of the times.

... As printers no doubt desire to be in fashion, we trust they will approve our course by sending in orders for them, that their patrons also may catch the infection.”

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With the demise of Victorian sensibilities around the turn of the century, extreme ornament lost its currency. In *The Practice of Typography* (1900), Theodore Low De Vinne offered a preemptive eulogy: “Printers have been surfeited with ornamented letters that did not ornament and did degrade composition, and that have been found, after many years of use, frail, expensive and not attractive to buyers.” However, De Vinne noted that “more changes have been made in the direction of eccentricity than in that of simplicity. Fantastic letters were never in greater request.

... To see the wildest freaks of fancy, one must seek them not in the specimen books of type founders, but in the lettering made for displayed advertisements and tradesman's pamphlets.” Commercial artists working for printers and agencies were creating hand-drawn, often one-of-a-kind novelties for use on a plethora of printed matter.

The vogue for novelty was attacked during the 1920s through the canon of purity and functionalism espoused by the New Typography and the Bauhaus. However, despite the proliferation of functional Modern sans-serif types like Futura, advertisers still required eye-catching type to appeal in increasingly competitive markets. Typography parlante has always had a place in the business of business, and the business of typography. Expedience wins out.

Because type design is based on past models, the present and future of novelty typography is déjà vu. It is seen as an ironic vernacular remnant of a primitive past. In a talented designer's hands, novelty concepts turn into an unlimited variety of fascinating concoctions. But for purists, traditional icicle-capped letters remain the *sina qua non* of type. ■